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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this small study is to describe and consider the perceptions of various individuals and groups--particularly teachers and students involved in or familiar with the general situation at Southeast High School (a pseudonym) and the work of the Grievance Committee in particular. The study was conducted by interviewing several key staff members at the school, talking with and obtaining written accounts from observers who were in a position to know about developments there, and administering a short questionnaire to a limited number of students and teachers. Although it is considered that the mere act of forming the Grievance Committee possibly reduced tensions, there is little reason to believe that the Committee succeeded in helping bring about permanent changes or improvements. (Author/JM)

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Problems and Perceptions in a Desegregated Urban High School: A Case Description and Its Implications*

(Revised Version - July 1970)

Daniel U. Levine and Kenneth R. Mares

Like hundreds of other urban high schools in the United States, Southeast High School in Kansas City, Missouri experienced its share of tensions and conflict during the closing years of the 1960s. Problems associated with racial desegregation as well as general student restlessness were matters of serious concern for the school's staff and students during this period.

In 1963 the percentage of black students at Southeast High School was less than 10%; following change in the racial composition of the Southeast Community, the proportion of whites dropped to 67% in 1967 and 41% in 1969. As has been true in many other resegregating high schools, overt conflict intensified as the percentage of black students increased from a small minority to a large majority. Particularly during the 1968-69 school year, disagreements between groups of students and between staff and students became more commonplace and threatened to result in major acts of violence. Fights, protests, and confrontations seemed to be the order of the day. By February of 1969, frictions had increased to a point which seemed to require elaborate security to protect property and the well-being of students. Parents, students, and staff expressed fearful and understandable uncertainty about the future of their school.

Conflict and unrest in a high school may involve a wide range of issues and concerns. At Southeast some of the issues which were most frequently raised by dissenting students involved the general redress of student grievances, participation by students in decision-making, and the role of the school newspaper. In March of 1969, a bi-racial Student Grievance Committee was formed as part of an attempt to resolve some of the frictions and dissatisfactions which were creating turmoil in the school. Following a 1969 summer workshop on student participation which was attended by a team of students, parents, and staff from Southeast, rules and policies concerning student government were revised to make the student government more representative of the total student body. While these actions did not result in major changes in the school, it is possible that they helped moderate tensions among the students. In any case it is worthwhile to examine the events which took place and the perceptions of individuals in a school like Southeast in order to determine their implications for teaching and administration elsewhere, because problems which exist at Southeast are common in many other schools.

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The purpose of this small study is to describe and consider the perceptions of various individuals and groups - particularly teachers and students - involved in or familiar with the general situation at Southeast High and the work of the Grievance Committee in particular. Needless to say, it is not our intent to pass judgment in any way on personnel and officials at the school; to do so would require much more information and wisdom than we possess - and even then it is questionable whether outsiders could understand the inner workings of a difficult situation well enough to justify any attempt to assign blame or praise.

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The study was conducted by interviewing several key staff members at the school, talking with and obtaining written accounts from observers who were in a position to know about developments there, and administering a short questionnaire to a limited number of students and teachers. In fact, the size of the sample was far too small to allow for much more than impressionistic commentary; for this reason no attempt can or will be made to provide definitive analysis and conclusions. Despite these obvious limitations, we believe that since hardly any empirical data have been published describing the perceptions of participants in troubled high schools, our admittedly-fragmentary data can be useful for educators at other schools.

Formation of the Southeast Grievance Committee

The winter of 1968-1969 was a troubled time at Southeast High School. Tensions which had been building up throughout the school year became particularly visible when a large number of black students left school early following the appearance of two black speakers at an assembly during Negro History Week in February, 1969. Later that same day, a number of fights between black and white students took place outside the school, and the next day many white students boycotted school. Problems which had been accumulating over months and years now seemed ready to erupt into widespread violence in the school and the community.

Shortly after tensions had reached this high pitch, a Student Grievance Committee was formed consisting of 16 members (one white and one black male and female from each grade level) appointed by the president and vice-president of the student council. With assistance on procedures from two youth workers whose help was obtained through a neighborhood development organization, the Committee functioned for the remainder of the semester in an attempt to improve the general level of morale as well as the interracial relationships in the school.

Although the mere act of forming the Grievance Committee possibly helped to reduce tensions at Southeast, there is little reason to believe that the Committee succeeded in helping bring about permanent changes or improvements. Some of the reasons for its relative lack of impact are examined in the following sections.

Lack of Clarification of the Committee's Purpose

One reason why the Committee did not achieve its purpose, at least in the perception of many of its members, was because its ambition to deal with a wide range of student dissatisfactions was not clear to the student body as a whole. In the absence of general student awareness that the Committee was organized and was available to help resolve a variety of issues, grievances would not be brought before the Committee and hence could not begin to be resolved there.

Lacking this clarification, it appears that the role of the Grievance Committee was perceived by many students as being limited primarily to race-related issues and tensions. This explanation was put forth by the Committee itself; its 26-point evaluation prepared at the end of the semester stated that, "Members of the Grievance Committee feel we did not acomplish as much as we could have because many students felt we were there only to deal with racial issues; members of the G. C. feel we should be able to work on other problems in Southeast High School." This perception was shared by several of the teachers and parent representatives we interviewed as well as by the Committee's two youth workers, one of whom pointed out

that misunderstandings may have been compounded by the great care originally taken to balance the racial composition of the Committee and by the fact that the Committee was formed immediately after serious racial disturbances had taken place in the school.

At this point it is relevant to cite evidence that the general dissatisfactions and grievances which were generating tension at Southeast High apparently were at least as widespread and deep-seated as were those directly or indirectly related to racial matters. The Grievance Committee, for example, included in its evaluation the statements that, "Students need someone they can talk to because we feel unable to talk to faculty and administrators about problems, without having our grades affected," and, "We feel faculty is disinterested and unwilling to listen to us about student problems, and therefore we find it hard to be open and honest."

This perception also was shared by the two youth workers, whose reports included the following two statements, respectively:

> I was led to believe that the deep-seated problem of Southeast with which we were to deal, was the black students' animosity toward the white students, and vice versa, which was culminating in increasing racial tension. However, over a period of time it became apparent that the student body was equally concerned about other problems, and that the racial issue was by no means the only problem or even the greatest problem for that matter.
>
> I think it is safe to say that the frustrated elements of the student community at Southeast High School, both black and white, are frustrated because no one seems to listen or care about them - care about their world view, and care about them as unique individuals.

Because it was not only possible but likely that the views of the Grievance Committee and the persons we interviewed were not representative on many issues of the views of the Southeast student body as a whole, we also sampled the opinions of students whose teachers agreed to let us administer a short anonymous questionnaire in the fall of 1969.[1] The questionnaire was given to students in three classes, one each at the sophomore, junior, and senior levels. Of the 65 students in these classes, usable responses were obtained from 63, 43 of whom were black and 20 of whom were white.[2]

Recognizing that our sample is a very small proportion of a student body of approximately 1,350, but keeping in mind that there is no reason to believe students in

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[1]Although the questionnaire was administered the semester following the events described in this paper, there is no reason to believe that major shifts occurred in students' general attitudes about their school during the intervening period.

[2]Unless otherwise mentioned, no clearly discernible differences in response to any of the items were found between students at differing grade levels or between the black and white students.

our sample are systematically biased in their views as compared to other students, the questionnaire results must be interpreted as supportive of the perceptions of the Grievance Committee and the youth workers. When asked, for example, "Do you think the biggest problem at Southeast High School is racism?", only 20 of the 59 respondents to this item (including 12 of the 39 black respondents) said "yes."[3] Explaining their answers, respondents cited a variety of problems ranging from one student's assertion that "Students who don't want to be in school are" to another's belief that "To me, racism is the last thing from the students' minds. Southeast has enough trouble without that."

Some sense of the general alienation that is growing almost visibly in urban high schools and apparently is widespread among the student body at Southeast can be inferred from replies to the item, "Do you feel the school system is responding to your needs?" Only 9 of the 43 black students (21%) and 3 of the 20 white students (15%) responded affirmatively. Elaborations added by respondents included such comments as, "The school system is responding to its own needs;" "Who gives a damn about the student?"; "I definitely do not believe the school system is really helping;" and "All subject matter is poured into you. You can sleep and still make E's on tests."

Similarly, 40 of the 43 black respondents (93%) and 14 of the 20 white respondents (70%) marked "Yes" in responding to the item, "Are students frustrated because no one seems to listen or care about them?"[4] Explanations which accompanied these answers pinpointed student-focused[5] and institution-focused[6] causes in roughly equal proportions.

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[3] It should be kept in mind that our sample was obtained in the fall of 1969 when Southeast had become 60% or more black. It is possible that racial problems were more salient in 1968-1969 when the school was more evenly balanced, and that a sample taken at that time would have yielded a higher percentage of affirmative responses on this particular item.

[4] As a check on the veracity of respondents, the items, "Do you think that there are some teachers that are concerned about student problems?" and "What is your perception of teacher attitudes to student problems?" were included on the questionnaire. On the first question, only 3 respondents answered negatively. On the second, which used a 5-point scale running from "sympathetic" to "unsympathetic," the mean response was 3.17 - very close to the mid-point on the scale. These results indicate that respondents were not offering blanket condemnations of their school or teachers. Instead, distinctions evidently were being drawn between positive or sympathetic stimuli on the one hand and negative or unsympathetic stimuli on the other, thus suggesting that students in the sample were responding seriously and honestly to the questionnaire.

[5] e.g., "Some of the students don't take time to listen. They bring some frustration on themselves"; "Students are frustrated because they have nothing else on their mind. If some would try picking up a book maybe it would solve a few problems."

[6] e.g., "They don't try to listen to what we have to say"; "Students are frustrated because administrators won't listen to their desires to change the teaching industry. It should be based on friendship and trust, not the old teacher-pupil relationship."

Reviewing these responses, it is easy to understand why members of the Grievance Committee said they were reluctant to have its role limited to helping in the resolution of race-related grievances and it is reasonable to conclude that lack of clarification of the Committee's role would constitute a major obstacle to the attainment of its broader purposes. Based on the limited information available to us, it appears that even though students differed considerably among themselves in their views toward their teachers and the education they were receiving, frustration and dissatisfaction within the school were very widespread. Before the Grievance Committee could be expected to help alleviate the situation, however, its mandate for doing so first would have to be made crystal clear throughout the institution.

Controversy Over the School Newspaper

Searching for ways to inform the faculty and the student body about the Grievance Committee's role and purpose, the two youth workers working with the Committee requested permission to attend a faculty meeting and to use the school's classroom public address system to accomplish this goal. When these requests were not acted upon, the Grievance Committee hit upon the idea of communicating through the regular school newspaper, The Tower. If The Tower did not presently serve as a mechanism for airing and resolving student dissatisfactions, perhaps it might do so if it were tied in the work of the newly-formed Grievance Committee.

To determine whether The Tower was presently functioning or might function in the future to help resolve student grievances, the Committee prepared an eight-item questionnaire and distributed it to other students in the school. In addition to asking respondents how often they purchased the paper, the questionnaire also asked if respondents thought the paper was "too political" and if it "voiced the honest opinion of all the students." The Committee found that more than three-fourths of those who answered the questionnaire did not believe The Tower represented the "honest opinion of all students" and that many viewed the paper as a medium which emphasized mostly the good things about the school but tended to neglect its problems. The Committee also found it had become embroiled in a major controversy over the action it had taken in preparing and distributing the questionnaire.

Understandably, the teacher who sponsored The Tower, and whose class produced it, strongly objected that the newspaper staff had not been consulted about the content or validity of the questionnaire - a failure for which the Committee then offered an apology. She also pointed out that traditionally the major function of the paper had been to prepare many of the students in journalism classes for careers in journalism and not to serve primarily as a school-wide sounding-board for airing student opinions or for redressing student grievances. After a meeting at which the individuals involved were unable to resolve these differences of opinion concerning the newspaper's purposes and functions, it was evident that The Tower would not within the near future play an important part in clarifying and discharging the role of the Grievance Committee.

Our data from students in the three classes sampled in the fall of 1969 support the Grievance Committee's conclusion that The Tower, whatever other important functions it serves, has not been functioning as a school-wide force for discussion of student viewpoints and expression of their hopes and fears. When asked, "Do you feel that the journalism class that writes The Tower expresses the attitudes of the

majority of students?", 78% of our respondents said "no."[7] Similarly, when asked, "Do you think the Tower spotlights only the good students and should be more varied?", 80% indicated agreement. (Several students said they thought the statement would have been more accurate if the word "popular" had been substituted for "good.") In suggestions made in response to an open-ended item on how the Tower might be improved, furthermore, 17 respondents volunteered statements which expressed the belief that students should have more of a voice in running the paper, and 10 said they thought larger numbers of students should participate in writing the paper and receiving recognition in it. In general, a recurrent thread in responses to this series of items on the questionnaire was best illustrated in the response of a student whose rejoinder to the question on whether the Tower expresses the views of a "majority" of students was "How could it? It is expressing the feelings and attitudes of teachers."

Unrepresentative Composition of the Committee

One reason why the Grievance Committee had turned to the Tower as a possible channel for communicating with other students was because its members felt they did not have adequate direct contact with the student body as a whole - particularly the more frustrated and alienated elements in it. Members of the committee had not been elected but appointed by officers of the student council; to an extent this meant that the Committee faced the same problem as has plagued many student councils in U. S. high schools: how to establish and maintain credibility with the masses of less "visible" students who participate very little in official school organizations but would have to be consulter and paid attention to if tensions in the school were to be more than just temporarily relieved. "The Student Grievance Committee," in the words of one of the two youth workers, "was composed of the 'good citizen types' who had all the best intentions in the world but really had no way of implementing the decisions that they reached in their weekly meetings . . . They felt a sense of powerlessness because they were not representative of the entire student body."

Related to this issue was the feeling among members of the Grievance Committee that their "elite" appointive status created distrust among the very constituency it was most necessary for them to reach - a feeling expressed in their semester-end evaluation statement in which they reported that the student body looked on the Committee as a "spy group" for the faculty. Responses to the questionnaire we administered during the fall semester supported their contention that a credibility problem existed among a substantial proportion of their fellow students: 41% of the 64 students who responded to our item, "Did you perceive the Student Grievance Committee as a 'tool' of the faculty and administration?" said "yes." In addition, 57% of the 59 students who responded to the item, "Do you think the Grievance Committee was representative of the student body?" said they did not think so.[8]

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[7]Although black respondents said "no" (6 yes, 43 no) more frequently than white respondents (6 yes, 13 no), even the white students said no by a margin exceeding 2 to 1.

[8]White respondents were less inclined than black students to perceive the Grievand Committee as representative of the student body. Only one-quarter of the former as compared with approximately half of the latter felt the Committee was representative.

Despite this latter response, however, 62% of our respondents said they thought the Committee should be continued during the 1969-1970 school year.[9]

Implications

Even though it is not possible to reach definitive conclusions from the limited amount of data available to us in the present study, the material reviewed on the preceding pages does suggest several generalizations about the problem of student unrest in an urban high school.

First, student councils or equivalent student government mechanisms which are not representative of the entire student body may be unable to play a very significant part in solving problems which are of intense concern to many students in a school. Traditionally, many if not most high schools have not allowed or have not successfully recruited academically or socially unsuccessful students to serve on the student council. The theory that membership on the council should be a reward for achievement and an incentive to achieve in academic, social, and other areas is no longer as functional as it may have been when problems of alienation and unrest in the schools were not as visible or serious as they are today.

At Southeast High School, for example, the students and teachers whom we questioned generally agreed that the student council had not been very successful in dealing with problems which were leading to tension and conflict in the school. Broadening eligibility rules for the student council in the fall of 1969 presumably helped to moderate feelings of exclusion among students who previously were formally excluded from participation in student government, though it may have accomplished little else in the way of affirmative action to solve underlying problems in the school.

The advisability of broadening student government to more directly represent the entire student body recently was highlighted in a booklet published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Written for the Association by Robert L. Ackerly, the booklet urged that, "Qualifications for candidates should be as broad as local circumstances will permit. The widest possible participation in student government should be encouraged, and any real or anticipated disagreement with the administration should not hamper its activities."[10]

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[9]Although white students in our sample were only slightly more inclined than black students to perceive the Grievance Committee as a "tool" of the administration, as a group they seemed much less supportive of a proposal to continue the Grievance Committee than were the black students: only 8 of 18 white respondents as compared with 26 of 37 black respondents said they thought the Grievance Committee should be continued in 1969-1970. Reasons given for discontinuing the Committee generally reflected a feeling that it had not accomplished very much, though several respondents advocated disbanding it primarily to expose what they perceived as an administrative "sham" in setting it up in the first place.

[10]Robert L. Ackerly, The Reasonable Exercise of Authority. Washington, D. C.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1969, pp. 16-17.

Merely loosening eligibility rules for serving on a student council, however, often will not achieve the desired purpose of bringing a full range of students into the council's deliberations. Habit, inertia, apathy, and other factors may result in the election of a council little different in composition from the councils of the past. In such an eventuality, the role of the council should be assessed to determine why or whether many students do not take it more seriously, and a distribution or quota system might be needed to ensure representation of all elements in the student body. Recognizing this, the Columbus, Ohio Board of Education has moved to revitalize student councils in its secondary schools through the following policies it adopted in the fall of 1969:

> The student council shall be broadly representative of the entire student body.
>
> Requirements for membership on the student council shall be reviewed annually. . . .
>
> At least one student council meeting each grading period shall be open to any member of the student body who is not a member of the student council. . . .It will be necessary to schedule such meetings when classes are not in session. At each such meeting, time shall be reserved for expressions from non-members. . . .
>
> On or before September 15 of each year, the school shall provide each student with a written statement indicating . . . /how/ the student council is organized and operated to provide opportunity for the expression of student opinion.[11]

Second, just as the traditional structure and rules for the student council need to be revised in accordance with changing conditions in the modern high school, so, too, the traditional role of the school newspaper should be reviewed and revised in much the same manner. As was implied above in our brief account of the controversy over the Southeast Tower, part of the problem which confronted the Student Grievance Committee was to communicate more effectively and directly with the student body. On the one hand the Committee - and probably a substantial percentage of the student body as well - saw the school newspaper as an appropriate and logical instrument for doing this. On the other hand the faculty sponsor and at least some of the newspaper staff viewed the paper first and foremost in terms of its traditional role as a means to develop skills in journalism and creative writing - a function which was, after all, the accepted role of the paper at the time they became involved with it. In the absence of institutional initiative to formally reassess the newspaper's role in a modern high school, major conflict arising from these varying perceptions is almost certain to occur in many high schools.

Recognizing this need for administrative action and initiative, Roy K. Wilson, Executive Director of the National School Public Relations Association, recently advised the nation's school administrators to make some major modifications in

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[11] "Section 1026 - Student Relations," A Policy Enacted by the Columbus, Ohio, Board of Education on September 2, 1969.

entrenched policies which have long been followed with regard to school newspapers:

> Be sure that all copy for the official student newspaper be approved prior to publication by the faculty and/or administration.
>
> Limit the student newspaper to student affairs, always with a positive approach as the guideline . . . /orig. ital./
>
> Result: Total chaos!
>
> What may have seemed an acceptable formula for handling 'bootleg' student activities even just a year ago won't work in this 1969-1970 school year. What's more, the proliferation of underground newspapers - one survey estimates that there are 500 underground newspapers in the high schools - is proof that the policies of the past haven't worked . . . The newspaper's columns should be open to all students and faculty who wish to express their opinions. Part of the training should include instruction on libel and its consequences.[12]

Similarly, the booklet published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals also recommends major revisions in traditional policies which generally have governed high school newspapers:

> School-sponsored publications should be free from policy restrictions outside of the normal rules for responsible journalism /orig. ital./. These publications should be as free as other newspapers in the community to report the news and to editorialize.
>
> Students who are not on the newspaper staff should also have access to its pages. Conditions governing such access should be established and be available in writing, and material submitted should be subject to evaluation by the editorial board and, if need be, a faculty review board. These same principles apply to access to other school publications.[13]

Third, beyond restructuring of the student council and revision in the role of the school newspaper, a school-wide mechanism is needed to bring out into the open and deal with a wide variety of issues and potential conflicts in urban high schools. Since the alternative is to try to sweep problems under the rug where they tend to build up by natural combustion and eventually explode, this generalization may seem so self-evident as to be trite. Judging, however, by the fact that a great many high schools have not created such a mechanism, it must be concluded that the point is not self-evident to many educators. It would be very foolish to think that the deep dissatisfaction among students which our data indicate is so prevalent at Southeast is significantly greater than is the alienation among students in most other urban high schools, yet few persons knowledgeable about today's high schools

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[12] Roy K. Wilson, "Guest Editorial," The School Administrator, February 1970, p. 2.

[13] Ackerly, op. cit., p. 17.

would say that the majority are making any systematic effort to identify issues and deal with them openly.

At present no one really knows whether a student government, a student grievance committee, a school ombudsman, a school survey committee, or some particular combination of these or other mechanisms is the best and most effective way to systematically assess and improve general conditions in a high school. What does seem clear (at least to us), however, is that the absence of such mechanisms is associated with serious deterioration in a school's capacity to solve its problems. With no formal channels to ensure that teachers and administrators will be forced to address themselves directly to the pervasive alienation which exists throughout the school, school officials often tend to attribute problems to "outside influences" or other causes which are beyond their immediate control and hence do not require them to undertake the difficult task of bringing about change within the institution itself.

Examples of the kind of action that might be taken to ensure that personnel in a high school will face up to underlying problems which exist throughout the institution again can be cited in policies recently drawn up by the Columbus, Ohio Board of Education:

> On or before March 1 of each year, each senior high school, with the assitance of the Depaptment of Evaluation and Research, shall conduct a survey of student opinion, employing a broadly representative sample of students. The results of the survey shall serve as a basis for planning for the succeeding year.
>
> To minimize the staff requirements for the surveys mentioned in Points 7 and 8, the senior high school principal shall designate a faculty member and select a team of at least three qualified students to work with the Department of Evaluation and Research in conducting these surveys. . . .
>
> To provide further for the maintenance of open communications between the school administration and student body, principals are advised to . . . Assign guidance counselors the responsibility of organizing and maintaining a group guidance program so that emphasis may be given to the discovery and discussion of problems and concerns of students; hold grade-level and/or student body assemblies, as needed, to serve as a forum for the discussion of school affairs; /and, among other suggestions/ invite students to attend staff meetings when deemed appropriate and advisable.[14]

One particular mechanism which increasingly is being used to make sure that serious problems in a high school are brought to the surface and given real attention by staff members and students is the so-called "moratorium" or "convocation" approach to conflict resolution. Basically, what this approach does is to cancel (call a moratorium) on regular school classes and activities for a significant

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[14] "Section 1026 - Student Relations," op. cit.

number and sometimes all teachers and students and thus free up one or more school days so that dissatisfactions can be considered and resolved. Working in small groups with trained discussion leaders, participating in assemblies or large group caucuses, and represented by delegates elected to negotiate conflicting viewpoints, everyone in a school is given a meaningful opportunity to help identify and solve problems which are creating so much unrest in urban high schools. Among the most sensible aspects of this approach is its open acknowledgement that recurrent unrest detracts from learning and that two or three days spent facing up to issues is a small price to pay for clearing up conditions which greatly inhibit the amount of learning that takes place in a school.

Moratoriums which concentrate on solving school problems have been held at a number of colleges and universities as well as at high schools in Los Angeles, Chicago, and other cities. While it is obvious that a moratorium may or may not have a significant positive impact depending on the conditions in a given school and especially on the administrative leadership which is provided in organizing it and carrying it out, reports from high schools which have followed this approach have been mostly enthusiastic. One recent account from a San Mateo High School, for example, told how

> Driven by sincere concern on the part of many faculty members and a strong element of fear, the faculty moved to elect a council that was to represent the staff in dealing with the present crisis and with other matters concerning the faculty. This council represented all views and positions that were held by the faculty . . . The council then met almost all day the following Sunday and prepared to enter into dialogue with representative student groups.
>
> The first thing we had to do as a council was to find out exactly where we stood and from what philosophical base we were operating. We had to sit down and make a few admissions such as:
>
> 1. The school as it is presently designed is not managing to include all students in its educational program.
>
> 2. The school as it is now structured is an outmoded system that was designed for a rural-oriented society that was prevalent over a century ago. . . .
>
> When Monday morning came, Mrs. C. was there to begin the convocation . . . The tension could be felt by all conerned. The students had a lot of things to say about individuals, policies, courses, teachers, and the school in general. They articulated their concerns with great clarity and conviction. They told us some things that many members of the faculty council were just not aware of. . . .
>
> The many long hours of dialogue between the students and the faculty council produced one of the most emotional, heart-warming experiences that most of us, and I would say

> the vast majority of students and the faculty present, had ever experienced. . . .We set out to really get down to the root causes of what it was that had students so discontented with the educational process . . . After listening intently, tow things became very clear to the faculty council. One was that black students were saying, 'Please include us in your educational program,' and that many of the other students, mainly white and Oriental, were saying ' How about a little choice in our program?' Another point that came through loud and clear from <u>all</u> students was, 'We want to be heard. If there is something we have to say that is educationally sound, then move on it, implement it to the best of your ability, show good faith, show a willingness to change, show flexibility.'[15]

Readers of any daily newspaper are aware that high schools in all parts of the country have been "shut down" by conflict and protest. When a school is closed for a longer or shorter period of time due to fighting among students, demonstrations that threaten to spill over into violence in the community, or other disruptions that mark a breakdown in control and security, students, faculty, and groups in the community tend to become so polarized and emotional that it becomes much more difficult to deal effectively with underlying problems in the institution. There are times when drastic action such as calling in the police is needed as a last-ditch measure to maintain order in a high school, but doing so does not in itself solve problems in the school; at best it merely keeps the lid on. Equally drastic action is needed to modify curriculum and instruction and improve human relationships in the school, if possible to reduce the chance that a school will blow up at all but certainly to provide a new and better basis for teaching and learning if it has blown up. It makes a world of difference whether a school is closed to grapple with the fundamental challenge of making it a better school or to re-establish conditions the way they were until the next blow-up.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief description of some of the events associated with unrest at Southeast High School in Kansas City, Missouri during the 1968-1969 school year. Data collected from a small sample of students suggested that dissatisfaction among the student body was widespread and extended to many issues in the school. This evidence also suggested that limiting the student government and the student newspaper to traditional roles and functions had been a serious impediment to the resolution of conflict in the school.

There is no reason to believe that the kinds of unrest and the root causes of the unrest which occurred at Southeast High School are very different from those in many other urban high schools. Indeed, evidence available from the few national surveys which have been conducted on the views of high school students indicates that discontent with teaching and learning conditions is pervasive in many if not

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[15] Ike Tribble, "Trust: A New Approach to Student Unrest," <u>Educational Leadership</u>, v. 27, no. 4 (January 1970), pp. 392-396.

most high schools, regardless of whether they are in middle class suburbs or inner city slums and regardless of whether they are predominantly white or black or racially mixed;[18] thus implications derived from a case description of one high school can be relevant for educators at many other schools as well.

Implications drawn from the case description presented in this paper were that student government should be broadened to make it directly representative of the entire student body; the purpose of the student newspaper should be re-defined to increase institution-wide dialogue on school problems; additional school-wide mechanisms should be developed and systematic efforts should be undertaken to assess and improve the status of instruction and improve human relations throughout the school; and moratoriums, convocations, or similar approaches can be used to mobilize an entire school to deal explicitly with whatever conflicts and problems are creating alienation and unrest.

What these implications really boil down to is a recognition that urban secondary schools no longer can expect to function very successfully unless substantial changes are made in their organization and operation. Educational psychologists have shown conclusively that classroom methods which emphasize the preparation and regurgitation of standard amounts of instructional material are inefficient and ineffective because nearly all of this material is forgotten within a month of the time it allegedly is "learned." This approach to education was minimally tolerable at a time when most students were not expected to graduate from high school and only a small elite went on to college. In the past thirty years, however, the importance of education has increased and the high schools now have a responsibility to provide effective education for as many of the nation's young as possible. Yet, ineffective teacher-centered methods continue to be the norm in a large number of high school classrooms. Colleges of Education have produced many secondary teachers who feel they somehow are not "teaching" unless they are lecturing or otherwise propagating subject-matter information in traditionally-organized classrooms. When it becomes apparent that these methods not only are not working but are alienating a large percentage of students, teachers who are conscientious frequently redouble their efforts to provide more of the same and teachers who are quickly frustrated sometimes give up trying to teach. As Fred Hechinger pointed out in summarizing the recent report of the Citizens' Committee for Children on educational conditions in New York City high schools, "There is still the 'teaching to' and drilling for examinations . . . the report is likely to startle high school graduates of 25 to 30 years ago because it makes it appear that the world has stood still."[19]

What is likely to happen when the staff of an urban high school simply lets matters run their course until student discontent builds to a crescendo and eventually explodes? The result, as we have seen happened at Southeast High School, is likely to be a crisis which leaves little time or room for maneuver to resolve the underlying issues that brought on the crisis. At Southeast the response was

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[18] Louis Harris, "The Life Poll: What People Think About Their High Schools," Life, v. 66, no. 19 (May 16, 1969), pp. 23-41.

[19] Fred Hechinger, "Bad Report on Unchanging High Schools," The New York Times, January 18, 1970.

to accept the proposal of some students and community representatives that a Student Grievance Committee be formed. But the Grievance Committee, in the words of one observer who was very familiar with the problems it encountered, "was a crisis-response project with no ground rules and no real authority for handling conflict or for increasing student participation." Thus it had two strikes on it before it ever came to bat.

Based on our information on Southeast High School and our knowledge of other urban high schools as well as institutions of higher education, we believe that the consequences of trying to ignore student grievances until they either wither away or culminate in a full-blown crisis are easily predictable. On the one hand, the faculty will tend to become more polarized between those who feel that the major need (as one of our faculty respondents said) "is for teachers to rid themselves of their own prejudice and defensiveness" and those who feel that the school's problems are caused (as another said) primarily by outside organizations, a few student leaders, and militant colleagues who "are eroding out chasms of hate and resentment." If a grievance committee or some other student group is formed but has little authority or opportunity to achieve the results it is expected to produce, it will tend to be seen in the same manner as the Student Grievance Committee was perceived by Southeast faculty members who told us that, "The Committee was very irresponsibly managed and totally lost any respect from the teachers. The term 'grievance committee' became synonymous with attacks against teachers," "It stirred up more hard feelings than it healed," and, "I have served on such committees, and only 'radical outsiders' and student rebels are heard."

When no real attempt is made to involve the entire staff and student body in a systematic effort to consider and solve problems in the school, and when little or no official authority is delegated to student, faculty, and parents groups created for this purpose, it is also natural that any faction or group which does attempt to come to grips with the situation will be seen as unauthorized troublemakers bent on destroying existing authority patterns within the institution.

Students, on the other hand, also react in predictable ways in high schools in which instructional practices and authority patterns are very much the same as was true twenty years ago. Where school officials have not taken the initiative to make these patterns and practices more responsive to student grievances, requests for improvements - the legitimate ones along with the illegitimate ones - often are met with little but endless discussion and token solicitude. Why should improvements be made in a school, after all, when the lack of a continuous school-wide process for identifying and instituting improvements means that a student or parent bold enough to ask for change is likely to be seen as an isolated troublemaker? The end result among students, in such a school, is an all-too-often justified feeling that peaceful efforts to improve their schools not only have no success but are not even taken seriously.

It is no easy matter for teachers and administrators in a high school to systematically re-examine every aspect of the instructional program they are conducting and of the quality of their relationships with all elements in the student body. It is even more difficult to make significant changes in instruction and human relationships while discharging innumerable other tasks and assignments which the members of a high school faculty are responsible for accomplishing. But the alternative, as was argued on the preceding pages, is to enter into a vicious circle marked by hardening faculty and community attitudes toward students who do

raise issues in the school and escalating student impatience with the slow pace of change and the apparent lack of responsiveness generally associated with such attitudes. The essence of this vicious circle is an out-dated psychology which assumes, as George A. Miller pointed out in his 1969 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association, that, "When something goes wrong, someone is to blame, and every effort must be made to establish his guilt so that he can be punished."[20] To let this discredited view of man in society continue to govern perceptions in an urban high school is to compound the likelihood that faculty will become increasingly punitive and students will become increasingly disruptive. Whatever else such an institution may accomplish, neither teachers nor students are likely to be satisfied with the quality of education produced in it.

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[20] George A. Miller, "On Turning Psychology Over to the Unwashed," Psychology Today, v. 3, no. 7, p. 68.